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ABSTRACT

Reflexivity, defined as the self-applied process of learning, the use of self and others as active signs in the learning process, is examined through relevant literature in English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) instruction. When EFL learners are encouraged to stand back and examine the way they learn and why they learn this way, reflexivity naturally emerges. Four perspectives related to how EFL learners use reflexivity as a powerful learning strategy to read and write are: (1) reflexivity in personal experiences, (2) reflexivity and the verbal self-report method, (3) reflexivity in shared inquiry, and (4) time for reflexivity. Examples from a study of how EFL learners at different linguistic levels used each of these approaches are presented, clearly indicating that use cf reflexivity changes EFL learners' perspectives on their learning, which in turn propels the learning process. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/MSE)

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REFLEXIVITY AS A LEARNING STRATEGY IN EFL

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Abstract

Reflexivity in this paper is defined as a self-applied process of learning -- the use of self and others as active signs in the learning process. When EFL learners are encouraged to stand back and examine the way they learn and why they learn this way, reflexivity naturally emerges. Four perspectives related to how EFL learners employ reflexivity as a powerful learning strategy to read and to write are (a) reflexivity in personal experiences, (b) reflexivity and the verbal self-report method, (c) reflexivity in shared inquiry , and (d) time for reflexivity. Examples from a study of EFL learners with different linguistic levels presented through each perspective, clearly indicate that the use of reflexivity changes ESL/EFL learners' perspectives on their learning, and that, in turn, propels their learning process.

Introduction

In recent years, inquiry into learning English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) has moved away from the quest for achieving more prefect learning to focus instead on how successful learners actually achieve their goals (Wenden & Rubin, 1987; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Such changes have led to closer investigation of how ESL/EFL learners approach learning, both in and out of classrooms. Attention has especially been drawn to what process strategies learners employ when encountering obstacles since ESL/EFL learners so frequently struggle with ambiguities, difficulties, confusions, and even different cultural values. Research into the reading strategies of ESL students indicates that learners' behaviors can be best explained by reference to how individuals perceive and interpret their own experiences. The contribution of this study is to examine reflexivity as one learning strategy developed from learners' personal experiences.

When ESL/EFL learners are encouraged to step back and examine their learning tasks both as learners and as thinkers, reflexivity is naturally generated (Short & Burke, 1992; Donoahue, Van Tassell, & Patterson, 1996). Reflexivity or reflective thinking, as proposed by John Dewey, is a disciplined, purposeful thinking; it involves turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration. As a process reflexivity starts with a problem and moves toward a solution by shifting, relating, and ordering a flow of ideas (Dewey, 1938). Reflexivity in this paper refers to a learner's ability to use the self and others as instruments for one's own learning (Peterson & Eeds,1990; Short & Harste, 1996). That is, reflexivity is defined as a self-applied process of leaning -- the use of self and others as active signs in the learning process. Reflexivity is a mental action that allows learners to be able to turn their experiences into learning or to apply their experiences in new contexts (Simmons, 1996). In this paper, four perspectives with reference to reflexivity will be discussed in detail. The four perspectives are reflexivity in personal experiences, reflexivity in the reading process, reflextivity in shared inquiry, and time for reflexivity.

2. *EXAMPLES FROM TAIWANESE EXPERIENCES*

A. Reflexivity in personal experiences

Reflexivity can be a strategy to help learners recall, remember, and compare their past experiences with the current ones. Beach (1991) advocates using autobiographical responses to interpret texts. Such responses are viewed as an interpretive form of narrative to help learners construct language, knowledge, and experience and ultimately to re-construct themselves. That is, reflexivity provides opportunities to integrate self and knowledge. The following examples demonstrate situations in which participants meshed their past experiences with a current textual experience to create a whole construct, and, as a result, were able to jump outside the purely textual frames and create their own enlarged frames (Chi, 1995a).

[Example A: In reference to verbal self-reports]

> *I wonder what types of pains does the girl have? What types of pain does the disease cause her? Physical or mental pains? These types of pain are very different. To me, the physical pains are a type of superficial pain because they can be cured, but the mental pains are hard to be completely cured by medicine ... From my point of view, this type of disease is originally from physical situations but when I re-read the article, I realize it comes from both physical as well as psychological situations.*

[Example B: In reference to verbal self-reports]

> *After reading two stories, I started thinking about some questions. What if I were the characters in the stories, what could I do? Would I face the death as optimistically and peacefully as the girl [in the story]? Would I have courage to face the death? If I were the discus thrower, would I throw plates at the wall? That attitude would I take if I were the doctor? Would I be as kind as the doctor? What does death mean to me? Everybody will undergo the death one in his/her life. Now, I see their death. When will it happen to me and in what way? If eel human beings are so little and fragile. I don't know whether I cannot get any answers now ... I have never thought about the death before but I have started thinking about it.*

[Example C: In reference to verbal self-reports]

> *I felt sad, very sad, after re-reading the story. I felt sometimes I am just like the nurse, indifferent and inconsiderate to those whom I encountered, especially when I am busy.*

[Example D: In reference to the verbal self-repors]

> *When I re-read the story. I paid a pity on this patient. I sort of understood why he was different to the nurse and the doctor. See, nobody came to visit him. If I were hospitalized, I would expect my family to take care of me and my friends to visit me.*

These participants [Examples A, B, C, D] obviously injected themselves into the tales, identifying with, feeling sorrow for, or even sympathizing with the characters and their encounters; as a result, reflection was promoted and that made them more reflexively conscious of their own life experiences. That relexivity, in turn, provided them a deeper understanding of the text experiences. Through reflexivity, these participants not only integrated self with knowledge, but also actively sought out opportunities to look at things in new ways, to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar, and to consider and evaluate perspectives other than their own. Reflexivity caused these participants to discover new aspects of work and to deepen or even change their initial understanding of both the text and the self.

B. Reflexivity in the reading process

Reflexivity is a key unlocking the mystery of why some learners benefit from reading situations more than others. However, in the act of reflexivity, learners may have to face a shadow self, a self which they are not happy to discover. Reflexivity, then, sometimes requires that learners be vulnerable. When the ten participants in the study were requested to verbalize their thoughts in the process of reading (Chi, 1995a), some of them, in addition to focusing on the text, also examined their reading strategies. Such self examination helped them not only in the immediate act of reading, but promoted thinking about how their reading strategies could be used in broader reading situations. The following examples illuminate such situations.

[Example E: In reference to verbal self-reports]

> *... So far, I don't quite understand what the story is really about. I think I read too fast so that I am very easy to lose the comprehension ... I should slow down my reading speed. I now realize that I skip the parts of the texts being read. ... I think next time when I read I should write down something on the margin of the texts in order not to read too fast.*

[Example F: In reference to verbal self-reports]

> *I pay a pity for myself. I always read analytically, even reading a story. I think I have to be aware of the purpose of reading. Different types of texts should be read in different ways. I think I am a serious reader.*

[Example G: In reference to verbal self-reports]

> *Through the whole process, I started thinking "why I read and think this way" ... When I retrospected on myself, I wondered what type of reader I want to be, an emotional reader, reading along with the author, or an analytical reader, detaching myself from the text. ... I think I want to be a critical reader and I do not know how to do it, but I start thinking about how.*

[Example H: In reference to verbal self-reports]

> *I sensed that I liked to read on the level of the literal meaning because I usually read word by word. It [the verbal self-report method] did reflect the usual way I read English. I think my reading strategies are very poor but I don't know how to improve them.*

Apparently, the participants in Examples E,F,G, and H were comfortable using reflexivity as an opportunity to see themselves as other people saw them. What these participants were experiencing in the immediate situation not only reflected upon their past as readers and thinkers, but also helped them to re-construct the current experience in order to grow and improve their learning in the future. Such connected ways of knowing empowered them to act upon their reading world.

Not all participants realized the fruits of reflexivity in the immedite moment of reding.

It was not uncommon for a couple of days to elapse after reading a text before reflection would emerge tht could produce a new understanding of what the reading text was about. After finishing the research, the participants in Examples E, F, G, and H, used the verbal self-report method as a reflexive strategy in order to read their textbooks, and, in turn, to promote their critical thinking, as Examples I and J, below, demonstrates.

[Example I: In reference to the oral interview]

> *... After I joined the research, I realized that I seldom consciously thought how I read since I always focus on what I read. But, now I started to make more connections while reading English materials, including the textbooks, especially when I encountered difficulties. I always question why the author says this. Do I agree with this or that? I think the use of the verbal self-report is very time-consuming but it does help me to read the difficult or peculiar texts.*

[Example J: In reference to the oral interview]

> *... I started using this method to read other things, textbooks or magazines. And now when I read some stuff, I will consciously stop and think for a moment. This may help me to become a critical thinker.*

Reflexivity in the reading process was useful to these participants as a way of deciding how to learn based upon connecting to past events, thinking of solutions to problems, sparking new ideas, and dwelling on an unpleasant event in the hope of understanding by feeling. More importantly, through this problem-framing process and collective reflection, learners did "outgrow their former selves" and moved to new and often more significant insights. Such understandings can were then able to guide future learning. "We undertake reflection, not so much to revisit the past or to become aware of the metacognitive process one is experiencing but to guide future action." (Killion & Tondem, 1991, p.15).

B. Reflexivity in shared Inquiry

Language in all its aspects is a social act, so collaborating with other people is essential

and crucial for learning; this collaboration requires that learners interact well with both peers and more proficient language users (Vygotsky, 1978). Although, many classroom activities set up social environments for students to share what they read and write, few are set up for sharing or exchanging how they read and write. That is, students are usually encouraged to share factual knowledge (what-to-learn) but not procedural knowledge (how-to-learn). When engaged in reflective thinking with each other, learners are challenged to take that more extensive step, to inquire into and critiques what might be learned by becoming increasingly aware of their own problems and difficulties, learners begin to clarify their own learning problems and difficulties. That is, they discover not only what is meaningful but how also meaningfulness operates. In fact, reflexivity can become the cornerstone of learning through the process of shared inquiry (Athanases, 1989). As the following examples show, participants were also arranged for paired discussion about a reading text (Chi, 1995b).

[Example K: In reference to the oral interview]

> *After discussion with May, I had a better understanding of the meaning of the story. Originally, I thought it was a nonsense story, but now I sort of like it. In fact, the story is pretty interesting. I found I have focused too much on comprehending the story itself, but not on interpreting the story. That's probably why May's reading scopes were wider than mine. I really envy the way how she reads a story and I think I should discuss more often with her or any other classmates.*

[Example L: In reference to the oral interview]

> *I think discussion is very interesting. My partner Johnson and I not only had different stance toward the girl's death, but also had different ways of reading the story. Johnson never paid so much attention to the medical terms [of the story]. He simply focused on reading the plot of the story so he thought the story was very easy to read, but I read the story as carefully as I read the textbooks so I was bothered by the medical terms all the time. Maybe I should be more aware of my reading purpose. Different texts with different purposes should be read in different ways.*

Obviously, from the above examples, these learners shared their joy, fear, frustration, anger, warmth, and disappointment in the story as well as their values, beliefs, judgments, and preferences. As a result of such sharing , they were able to take an idea, expand it, and add to it. They were also prompted toward alternative explanations and interpretations, and encouraged to revise their meanings if they thought alternative explanations and interpretations were more appropriate. That is, in thinking reflectively about an interpretive problem, these participants gave full consideration to the ideas of others, weighed the merits of opposing arguments, and modified their initial opinions if the evidence demanded it.

Shared inquiry need not be restricted to face-to-face encounters. Whenever learners attend to the behavior of others,e ven if the communication is undirectional, akind of shared inquiry occurs. For example, the research included an activity during which I invited the participants to view video-tapes of their own reading/writing processes and those of three proficient learners (Jeff, Lin, and Lily). After comparing their own reading/writing processes with those of proficient readers, they responded as indicated below.

[Example M: In reference to oral interview]

> *I am impressed with the way how Lily writes. She is such a careful writer and thinker as well. She pays so much attention to modify her thoughts and revise her writing over and over in the process of writing. Unlike her, I am always impatient with my writing, especially when I had limited time or I had to write something that I don't know very much. I just wanted to finish it. I should spend more time in and be more patient with my writing assignments.*

[Example N: In reference to oral interview]

> *Jeff is such a great thinker since he is so able to integrated his pervious knowledge into the new context (the writing situation). I understand why his English is so excellent, not only because he is so much interested in English, but also because, from the video-tape, he was excellent at gathering what he has learned before and organized*

it in a very creative way. Now, I know he has some amazing writing and thinking strategies that I can learn from. I will try to use them next time when I write my own composition.

[Example O: In reference to oral interview]

Compared with the three better learners, I think I have too much focused on vocabulary. When I read, I always spent a lot of time on the words that I didn't know. When I wrote again, I always focused on how to use words to express ideas; on the contrary, Jeff, Lin, and Lily always focused on reading and writing a whole paragraph first. They didn't think so much when they encountered difficulties. Instead, they would make marks and came back to think about them later on. I should do this way. Maybe I can read and write faster and better.

[Example P:In reference to oral interview]

It is interesting to see how my classmates read and write through watching the video-tapes. I never know I can think that much while reading and writing. If I do as Jeff and Lily do, I will probably read and write better.

By becoming reflexive in the comparative context of peers' behaviors, students were able to channel their energy in a more powerful direction. That is, reflexivity helped my students in Examples M, N, O, and P to recall and compare their current experiences with their previous ones. More importantly, the participants in this research were not only pleased to watch themselves on videotapes but also impressed with such a technological way to help them become more aware of their thinking processes since they discussed their observations in great detail. Reflexivity does encourage them to make connections between what they know and what they are discovering as a result of a new experience; moreover, reflective thinking also allowed these participants to link things together and helped them to see new relationships. In other words, reflexivity has become the experience of discovery, of uncovering this range of meanings in the text. It is important that students confer with each other, and care should be

given to helping them share their reading/writing and processing strategies as well. Such a collaboration encourages a cooperative spirit in the reading/writing classroom.

D. Time for reflexivity

Time is so essential and crucial for reflection or "incubation" in which learners are able to mull over and think about what they have learned (Isakson, 1996). Too often, the pace of classroom activity does not allow ESL/EFL learners to pause and look at what they are currently doing, why they do it in a certain way, whether it is what they want to do, and what they should do next. Ungraded journal writing provides learners with adequate time for reflection since they can see themselves as readers, writers as well as thinkers. Taking time and energy to reflect on and improve one's learning are essential to the understanding process itself. Moreover, so often Taiwanese students consider reading and writing a one-step process from start to finish. The following examples, drawn from my previous research, represent the situations in which the participants apply journal-writing as a tool for reflection to ease their learning tension and associate with learning discomfort (Chi, 1996).

[Example Q: In reference to the journal writing]

> *I am not a quick thinker so journal writing gives me time to clarify my own thinking. I can't "digest" what my professor said or what classmates responded in the class. When I write the response journal, my classmates ideas have become so clear in my mind and I even write some disagreements.*

[Example R: In reference to the journal writing]

> *I don't quite agree to Paul's statement in today's class but I just did not know how to verbalize my disagreements. But now, in the process of writing my response to his ideas. I better understood his ideas and my disagreements.*

[Example S: In reference to the journal writing]

> *Journal writing helps me gradually be aware of my own problems of learning. I do not like thinking. I am very lazy in terms of*

thinking. What should I think? I have learned this before. With the journal writing in the past two weeks, I started to realize how important to think. It is just take to time to develop. In fact, thinking may result in my questions than answers.

In fact, reflexivity enabled the above participants to better set and attain personal goals and involved them not only in examining but also in acquiring beliefs, values, and attitudes about self, others, and tasks. These participants chose to exercise in the analysis and transformation of the situations in which they found themselves when they paused to reflect. Rather than shielding themselves from difficulties, learners should seek ways to solve problems and learn from them; in this sense, reflexivity can be a possible solution to learning difficulties and confusions.

CONCLUSION

Reflexivity is itself an experience, and not an end. It is a re-constructive and re-productive process, by which ESL/EFL learners are able to intentionally examine their learning events, beliefs, and behaviors, as well as make more of each experience. From this viewpoint, learning becomes a self-directed process, in which ESL/EFL learners realize what they need. Reflexivity expresses an orientation to action and because it concerns the relationship between thought and action; reflexivity becomes a power readers choose to exercise in the analysis and transformation of situations in which they find themselves when they pause to reflect.

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